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AUTHOR Wilson, Linda S.; Ranft, Victor A.
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ABSTRACT

Ethics training in graduate psychology programs has blossomed in the last decade but the debate continues regarding how graduate ethics should be taught. While an effective model of ethics training is being discussed among professors, student input has been negligible, and information from students in counseling psychology programs nonexistent. This study surveyed student representatives (N=50) from American Psychological Association-accredited doctoral programs in counseling psychology for 1990 on their exposure and type of ethics education, as well as their perception of preparedness to deal with ethical dilemmas. Results indicated that 94% of the programs require training in ethics. Ethics instruction is varied in format and methods. Formal coursework is apparently the most frequently used format, but seminars and integration with other coursework are also formats being utilized, sometimes in combinations. Students feel prepared for both legal and ethical issues which may arise in their professional roles, and this number jumps substantially after at least one course in ethics. Students who reported facing a previous ethical dilemma felt less prepared with factual information than in the decision making process, although they reported the emphasis of their training was much stronger on content than on process. This indicates that while students feel prepared to handle problem-solving and decision making related to ethical issues, they are not being taught these skills within their ethical training. (LLL)

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Ethics Training in Graduate Programs

Linda S. Wilson and Victor A. Ranft

Georgia State University

Paper presented at the 99th annual convention of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, August, 1991.
Correspondence should be addressed to Linda Wilson, Georgia State University, Department of Counseling & Psychological Services, Atlanta, GA, 30303.

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Abstract

Ethics training in graduate psychology programs has blossomed in the last decade but the debate continues regarding how graduate ethics training should be taught. While an effective model of ethics training is being discussed among professors, student input has been negligible and information from students in counseling psychology programs nonexistent.

The present study surveyed student representatives from APA-accredited doctoral programs in counseling psychology for 1990 on their exposure and type of ethics education as well as their perception of preparedness to deal with ethical dilemmas. Results indicate that 94% of the programs require training in ethics and that most students feel prepared for both legal and ethical issues which may arise in their professional roles. Students feel more prepared in the decision making process than in factual information of ethics; this finding was surprising given that the reported emphasis of their training was much stronger on content than on process.

Ethics Training in Graduate Programs

The importance of ethics in the professional practice of counseling and psychology is informally recognized by members of the profession and formally recognized by the professional codes of ethics (American Association of Counseling and Development, 1988; American Psychological Association, 1981). Professional publications and conferences are increasingly including ethics-related topics (Griffith, 1988). The Criteria for Accreditation of Doctoral Training Programs and Internships in Professional Psychology adopted by the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1979 mandated instructions in "scientific and professional ethics and standards for all students in every doctoral program in professional psychology" (APA, 1979). Likewise, training programs in the areas of counseling and mental health are beginning to require the teaching of ethics to their students (Vasquez, 1988).

Several trends may be factors in the recent emphasis on the teaching of ethics. The age of consumerism has brought about an increased awareness of ethical issues for psychologists (Griffith, 1988; Handelsman, 1989; Kessler, 1983). Rising concerns about professional liability and the prevention of malpractice suits may be a reflection of the consumer rights movement. By 1981, it was clear that lawsuits against psychologists were on the increase. Malpractice suits can be brought against psychologists not only for what they have done but also for what they have failed to do (Eberlein, 1987). "Litigaphobia" and "litigastress" are words that have been used to describe the profession's reaction to this state of affairs (Griffith, 1988). Peer review committees charged with monitoring the practices of psychologists and 3rd-party payers have also contributed to a trend toward greater awareness of the need for ethical training (Griffith, 1988).

Less pragmatic and more ideally, training programs may

simply be more aware of their responsibility to both teach and protect. By 1988, the importance of training in professional ethics as a basic component of training programs was acknowledged "both as protection for the public and the profession and as necessary competency for the trainee" (Vasquez, 1988, p. 238).

The results of these trends have been an increased emphasis on formal ethics training in graduate psychology programs in the last decade (Vasquez, 1988). In early 1979, a survey of APA approved graduate programs in clinical and counseling psychology by Pharis and Hill revealed that the majority of programs had no written curriculum plan designating responsibility for covering ethical issues. However, by 1982, Mandell & Heckel found that 80% of clinical psychology internship programs did offer specifically identified ethical training (cited in Kessler, 1983). Tymchuk, in 1985, found that 94% of the student respondents felt that "formal ethics training should be a required course in clinical graduate programs" (p. 225). By 1988, the teaching of graduate level courses in ethics was acknowledged as a "critical and necessary component of graduate training in psychology" (Fine & Ulrich, p. 542).

While the call for formal ethics training has grown louder, differing opinions exist as to how such training should be implemented. There is little consensus as to how ethical training should be conducted (Griffith, 1988; Kessler, 1983; Pettifor & Pitcher, 1982; White, 1988). For example, Eberlein (1987) describes a problem-solving approach to ethical and moral dilemmas based on the Canadian Code of Ethics with a focus on personal values and informed decision making. Fine and Ulrich (1988) emphasize the importance of integrating philosophy with psychology in teaching ethics and describe a course which is team taught by professionals from each of the two disciplines. White (1988) specifies two tasks of ethical training: (1) learning the ethical guidelines and legal requirements, and (2) applying them. He then describes a

computerized approach for addressing the content of ethical training. A variety of other strategies and components are described by other models of ethical training (Haas, 1991; Griffith, 1988; Pelsma & Borgers, 1986; Rest, 1982; Tennyson & Strom, 1986).

In spite of the lack of a universal model of ethical training, there does seem to be some agreement on the importance of learning more than just the professional code of ethics. Kitchener (1986) includes improving the ability to make decisions as a component in her model. White (1988) utilizes the computer for factual learning in order to save class time for moral and ethical reasoning skill development. Among their recommendations for teaching ethics courses, Fine & Ulrich (1988) include emphasizing the process and application of ethical reasoning. The importance of developing a personal structure of moral thought and action is accentuated by Eberlein (1987) as a basis for future ethical decision making. The value of teaching the process of ethical thinking and not just the rules and codes has also been supported by survey research (Handelsman, 1989; Pettifor & Pitcher, 1982; Pharis & Hill, 1979; Tymchuk, 1985). The current thinking on ethical training seems to be that "mere knowledge of a set of guidelines does not a professional make" (Eberlein, 1987, p. 358).

In a 1979 survey of approved graduate programs in psychology and social work, 77% ranked the priority of ethical training as average or lower (Pharis & Hill). This same study revealed that one-third to one-half of the students had never been asked to think or write on ethical issues. Not surprisingly, in the same year Tymchuk et al. found that only 67% of the chairs of APA-approved clinical programs reported providing a course in ethics (cited in Tymchuk, 1985). Early survey data from department heads in Canadian graduate schools of psychology also reflected a lack of strong commitment to teaching ethics (Pettifor & Pitcher, 1982). Only 63% believed that formal courses should be offered and

even less (59%) believed that they should be mandatory.

In a follow-up to two previous studies (one with APA-approved clinical psychology programs and one with APA members), Tymchuk (1985) surveyed APA student members regarding the degree of their ethical training and their views about this training. The 1985 study, which was also oriented primarily toward clinical programs, revealed that 83% of the student respondents felt that ethical training should be required of psychology graduate students as compared to 65% of the chairs and 89% of the psychologists in the two respective previous studies. Interest in the area of ethics training on the part of students was reflected by the fact that every respondent had a suggestion about how to improve the knowledge of ethical issues. Over two-thirds suggested the desire for development of problem-solving or decision-making abilities.

In an effort to examine the ethical training background of those responsible for the development of ethical sensitivity in counseling students, Stadler and Paul (1986) conducted a national study of department heads in counselor education and counseling psychology. Of those responding, three-quarters had no formal coursework in professional ethics as part of their graduate training. This was particularly troubling given the sensitive nature of the therapeutic relationship and the responsibilities of the professional organization. Much of the resistance to formal ethics training focused on the inability to teach moral integrity (Pharis & Hill, 1979). It was argued that an individual was ethical (or not) by nature and that limited ethical training would not make a person behave differently. Other arguments were related to the time needed to address ethics in formal coursework (Handelsman, 1989; White, 1988). It was believed that the time programs had with students was limited and therefore precious. Formal ethical training was thought to take away from other pressing instructional and practicum needs. When the Stadler and Paul (1986) results are broken down by decade in which the degree was awarded, the

picture is somewhat more promising. Of those who graduated in the 1980s, 78% did have formal coursework in ethics although the small number in this group may have inflated the figures.

Previous research on ethical training has focused primarily on training program faculty and practitioners in the field. Direct information related to students' perceptions, needs, and opinions about the efficacy of ethical training has been negligible. There are no studies to date which have specifically targeted students in graduate programs of counseling psychology. The present study addresses this gap through a survey of student representatives of APA-approved counseling psychology programs in the United States to assess the nature and extent of ethics training currently being offered.

Method

Participants and Procedures

The participants in this investigation responded to a survey which elicited responses concerning ethics training in their respective programs. Surveys were sent to the student representatives of APA-accredited doctoral programs in professional psychology for 1990 as listed in the American Psychologist (APA, 1990). Participation was voluntary and the only identifying information on the surveys were codes on return envelopes which were used solely for the purpose of sending a follow-up survey to institutions which did not respond to the first mailing. The actual surveys were separated from the envelopes and were kept separately in complete anonymity. Approximately four weeks after the first mailing, a second survey was sent to those programs which had not responded to the initial mailing.

The fourteen item survey composed of forced choice type questions was developed by two doctoral students in counseling psychology, two faculty members, and a program improvement professional along the guidelines proposed by Dillman (1978). Construct validity was determined through

the consensus of experts in professional ethics training. Questions referred to the student's perception of his or her own preparedness in dealing with ethical dilemmas as well as their exposure and type of ethics education received.

Results

Completed surveys were returned by 50 out of 59 programs (85%). All of the surveys had usable data. The data was analyzed using descriptive and MULT RESPONSE procedures within the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-X) (1988). The respondents were student representatives from APA accredited programs in counseling psychology. The results indicate that ethics training is required in most of the programs represented (94%). Of the three students who indicated that ethics was not required, two thought that it should be and one did not.

Almost all (96%) of the respondents identified themselves as doctoral students in varying stages of program completion. Six students (12%) were in their first year of graduate study. Twelve (26%) were in their second year of graduate study. Fifteen (34%) were in their third year of graduate study. Six (14%) were in their fourth year of study and seven (14%) had already completed four or more years of graduate work. All but five students had received instruction in professional ethics and fourteen had two or more courses.

Most students (76%) felt that they were adequately prepared for legal issues they may face. Only two students did not believe they were prepared for ethical issues. The other forty-eight students either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed (24 each for a total of 96%) that they were prepared for ethical issues. When faced with an actual ethical dilemma in the past, 85% felt they were prepared for ethical decision making and 73% felt prepared with factual information. Eight students stated that they had never faced an ethical dilemma in the past.

Courses in ethical training were varied in format and focus. Formal coursework in ethical issues accounted for 64%

of the instruction being delivered to the graduate students. Seminars accounted for another 48% and integrating professional ethics in other coursework was the format used by 44% of the programs. A few programs (4%) use a decision making laboratory. The method of instruction was heavily weighted towards the traditional approach: discussion (98%), lectures (76%), and scenarios (58%). Experiential methods were used by 20% of the programs surveyed.

The predominant focus of instruction was on the content of ethical and legal material such as knowledge of APA standards and relevant laws. The process of ethical decision making was not perceived to be as well emphasized. Eighty-six percent of the respondents received content instruction compared to 44% having instruction in the process of legal and ethical decision making.

When asked how professional ethics are assessed on comprehensive examinations, the students indicated that essays were used by 84% of the programs, multiple choice by 16%, situational measures by 25%, and oral examinations by 29%. Six percent responded that their ethical training was not assessed on comprehensive examinations.

The student composition of courses in ethical training by program of study is mixed. Counseling psychology students participate in ethics training with students from other disciplines in 51% of the programs surveyed. These disciplines included school, clinical, educational, consulting, and experimental psychology as well as counseling and counselor education. In all but three programs, the instructor was from the counseling psychology department. Separate courses for doctoral and master's level students were present in half the programs surveyed. In 65% of the programs which combined master's and doctoral level students, the instructional level was primarily oriented towards doctoral students.

Discussion

Caution must be observed when interpreting the results of this study. The survey instrument was not tested for its

reliability nor for any type of validity other than construct validity. The high response rate (88%) indicates that issues of ethical training are not only of interest to students but also important to them and most likely enhances the validity of the results (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavich, 1985). The sample, however, may not be truly representative since designated student representatives from each program were targeted for this survey. Thus the results, especially of opinions, may not be generalizable to other counseling psychology graduate students who are not designated representatives.

Almost all students in counseling psychology graduate programs today participate in professional ethics training as part of their graduate studies. An overwhelming majority (94%) reported that this was required of them as part of their program of study. The surprising element may be that this figure was not even higher given the fact that APA has required such training for accreditation of doctoral programs for the past 12 years.

Ethics instruction is varied in format and methods. Formal coursework is apparently the most frequently used format but seminars and integration with other coursework are also formats being utilized, sometimes in combinations. New and innovative approaches to teaching ethics, such as a decision making laboratory, are used very little. While the format of ethics instruction may be traditional, this study shows that more resourceful methods are being incorporated. Scenarios are now being used by 58% of the programs surveyed and 20% reported using experiential methods. This is encouraging given the need for training in the application of ethical principles rather than just the memorization of those principles.

One of the most interesting findings of this study is how the focus of the training relates to the students' perceptions of their preparation in knowledge and application. Students who reported facing a previous ethical dilemma felt less prepared with factual information (73%) than in the decision

making process (85%). And yet the focus of training as reported is much greater on content (86%) than on process (44%). This indicates that while students feel prepared to handle problem-solving and decision making related to ethical issues, they are not being taught these skills within their ethical training. The feeling of preparation in factual information seems to increase only after students have had two or more courses. But for the decision making process, this perception of being prepared increases after only one course. It may be that simply the exposure to the topic of ethical issues sets the wheels in motion for students to think about what they would do in an ethical dilemma. They may, therefore, feel prepared to make ethical decisions whether they have actually developed the skills or not.

Another important finding from this study is that students feel prepared for both legal issues as well as ethical ones. It is not surprising that fewer respondents felt prepared legally than ethically although given the previously mentioned "litigaphobia" this may be an area that should receive more attention in ethics courses. Interestingly, neither the number of years in the program, the type of course format used, nor the method of instruction affected the feeling of preparation for legal or ethical issues. After at least one course in ethics, however, the number of respondents reporting that they felt prepared for both legal and ethical issues jumped substantially.

In conclusion, it is clear that instruction in ethics is an accepted practice in counseling psychology doctoral programs and that students themselves perceive it as helpful in their preparation for their professional roles. It is encouraging that more experiential methods are being utilized within the traditional formats of university coursework. However, further research is needed on the discrepancy between the content-oriented focus of the majority of the programs and the students' perception of better preparedness in the decision making process of ethical dilemmas.

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